

Chapter 14
The Chronicle of the Seeker
An African Pilgrim to Mecca
Mahmud Kati

Despite their differences, all Muslims accept certain basic beliefs, such as the Oneness of God, and perform a number of common religious obligations that serve as powerful forces for Islamic unification. Among these is the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca. Every Muslim adult is expected, unless it is impossible, to travel once in a lifetime to Mecca, arriving during the sacred month of *Dhu-al-Hijja*, and join a vast multitude of other pilgrims in a mass celebration of devotional activities. Here Muslims of all sects, races, and social levels mingle without distinction and join in affirming the unity of the family of Islam.

The following document describes the famous pilgrimage that Mansa (King) Musa (Moses) of Mali (r. 1312-1327) made to Mecca in 1324-1325. The sheer size of Mansa Musa's entourage and the generosity this king of sub-Saharan West Africa exhibited to Muslims along the route guaranteed that the memory of his pilgrimage would not be lost. Several written accounts exist. This particular record is ascribed to the family of Mahmud Kati (1468?-1593), a native scholar and Islamic judge of Timbuktu. Kati, who according to tradition lived for 125 years, began to compose his history around 1519 and continued it until his death almost 75 years later. His sons and grandsons carried on his labors, bringing the story of Islam in West Africa down to 1655. As was the case with all contemporary writers in that region of the world, Kati and his family composed the work in Arabic.

Questions for Analysis

1. What does Mansa Musa's alleged reason for undertaking the pilgrimage suggest about the hajj and pilgrimages in general?
2. How did his going on pilgrimage make Mansa Musa a better Muslim? What does this suggest about the role of hajj?
3. Is there any evidence in this story to suggest that Islam, though a world religion, still retained strong Arabic connections and flavor? Explain your answer.
4. What impact did Mansa Musa's hajj have on the traditions and shared historical memory of Mali?
5. What role did oral tradition apparently play in sub-Saharan West African society?

We shall now relate some of what we have been able to discover about the history of the Mali-koy Kankan Musa.¹

This Mali-koy was an upright, godly, and devout sultan.² His dominion stretched from the limits of Mali as far as Sibiridugu, and all the peoples in these lands, Songhay³ and others,

¹ Titles meaning "King of Mali, Lord Musa."

² An Arabic term meaning "one who wields authority."

³ Songhay lay to the east of Mali and centered on the trading city of Gao. Mansa Musa's armies conquered Gao around 1325, and Mali maintained control over Songhay until about 1375. By the late fifteenth century, Songhay had replaced Mali as West

1 obeyed him. Among the signs of his virtue are that he used to emancipate a slave every day, that
2 he made the pilgrimage to the sacred house of God,⁴ and that in the course of his pilgrimage he
3 built the great mosque of Timbuktu⁵ as well as the mosques of Kukurey, Gundam, Direy,
4 Wanko, and Bako.

5
6 His mother Kankan was a native woman, though some say she was of Arab origin. The
7 cause of his pilgrimage was related to me as follows by the scholar Muhammad Quma, may God
8 have mercy on him, who had memorized the traditions of the ancients. He said that the Mali-koy
9 Kankan Musa had killed his mother, Nana Kankan, by mistake. For this he felt deep regret and
10 remorse and feared retribution. In expiation he gave great sums of money in alms and resolved
11 on a life-long fast.

12
13 He asked one of the ulama⁶ of his time what he could do to expiate this terrible crime,
14 and he replied, "You should seek refuge with the Prophet of God, may God bless and save him.
15 Flee to him, place yourself under his protection, and ask him to intercede for you with God, and
16 God will accept his intercession. That is my view."

17
18 Kankan Musa made up his mind that very day and began to collect the money and
19 equipment needed for the journey. He sent proclamations to all parts of his realm asking for
20 supplies and support and went to one of his shaykhs⁷ and asked him to choose the day of his
21 departure. "You should wait," said the shaykh, "for the Saturday which falls on the twelfth day
22 of the month. Set forth on that day, and you will not die before you return safe and sound to your
23 residence, please God."

24
25 He therefore delayed and waited until these two coincided, and it was not until nine
26 months later that the twelfth of the month fell on a Saturday. He set forth when the head of his
27 caravan had already reached Timbuktu, while he himself was still in his residence in Mali.

28
29 Since that time travelers of that people believe it is lucky to set out on a journey on a
30 Saturday which falls on the twelfth of a month. It has become proverbial that when a traveler
31 returns in a bad state, they say of him, "Here is one who did not set out on the Mali-koy's
32 Saturday of departure!"

33
34 Kankan Musa set out in force, with much money and a numerous army. A scholar told
35 me that he heard from our shaykh, the very learned qadi⁸ Abul-Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn Ahmad
36 ibn Anda-ag-Muhammad, may God have mercy on him and be pleased with him, that on the day
37 when the pasha⁹ Ali ibn al-Qadir¹⁰ left for Twat, announcing that he was going on the pilgrimage

Africa's major sub-Saharan trading kingdom and held this position of primacy until it was conquered in 1591 by invaders from Morocco.

⁴ The *Kaaba* in Mecca, Islam's holiest site.

⁵ Timbuktu was the major trading city of the kingdom of Mali from 1325 to 1433. Its mosque school became the chief center of Islamic learning in sub-Saharan West Africa.

⁶ A term that means "the Learned." Islam has no priests but, very much like Rabbinical Judaism, its religious authorities attain and hold their position by virtue of their learning.

⁷ An Arabic title of respect meaning "elder."

⁸ An Islamic judge who interprets and administers Sharia.

⁹ A Turkish title meaning "chief."

¹⁰ Governor of Timbuktu, 1628-1632.

1 to Mecca, he asked how many persons were going with him and was told that the total number of
2 armed men the pasha had with him was about eighty. "God is great! Praise be to God!," said the
3 qadi. "Everything in the world grows less. When Kankan Musa left here to go on pilgrimage he
4 had with him 8,000 men. The Askia Muhammad¹¹ made the pilgrimage later with 800 men, that
5 is, one-tenth of that. Third after them came Ali ibn Abd al-Qadir, with 80 men, one-tenth of
6 800." And he added, "Praise be to God, other than Whom there is no God! Ali ibn Abd al-Qadir
7 did not even achieve his purpose."
8

9 Kankan Musa went on his journey, about which there are many stories. Most of them are
10 untrue and the mind refuses to accept them. One such story is that in every town where he
11 stopped on Friday between here and Egypt he built a mosque on that very day. It is said that the
12 mosques of Gundam and Kukurey were among those he built. Both at lunch and at dinner, from
13 when he left his residence until he returned, he ate fresh fish and fresh vegetables.
14

15 I was told that his wife, called Inari Konre, went with him, accompanied by 500 of her
16 women and serving women.
17

18 Our shaykh, the Mori Bukar ibn Salih,...may God have mercy on him, told me that
19 Kankan Musa took forty mule-loads of gold with him when he went on his pilgrimage and
20 visited the tomb of the Prophet.¹²
21

22 It is said that he asked the Shaykh of the noble and holy city of Mecca, may Almighty
23 God protect it, to give him two, three, or four *sharifs*¹³ of the kin of the Prophet of God, may
24 God bless him and save him, to go with him to his country, so that the people of these parts
25 might be blessed by the sight of them and by the blessing of their footsteps in these lands. But
26 the shaykh refused, it being generally agreed that such things should be prevented and refused
27 out of respect and regard for the noble blood of the *sharifs* and for fear lest one of them fall into
28 the hands of the infidels and be lost or go astray. But he persisted in his request and urged them
29 very strongly, until the shaykh said, "I will not do it, but I will neither command nor forbid it. If
30 anyone wishes, let him follow you. His fate is in his own hands, I am not responsible."
31

32 The Mali-koy then sent a crier to the mosques to say, "Whoever wishes to have a
33 thousand *mithqals*¹⁴ of gold, let him follow me to my country, and the thousand is ready for him."
34 Four men of the tribe of Quraysh¹⁵ came to him, but it is claimed that they were freedmen¹⁶ of
35 Quraysh and not real Qurayshis. He gave the 4,000, 1,000 each,¹⁷ and they followed him, with
36 their families, when he returned to his country.
37

38 When the Mali-koy reached Timbuktu on his way back, he collected ships and small
39 boats on which he transported their families and luggage, together with his own women, as far as

¹¹ Askia (Emperor) Muhammad Ture the Great (r. 1492-1528), Lord of Songhay. The askia undertook his pilgrimage in 1495-1496, accompanied by Mahmud Kati, who was one of his chief advisors.

¹² The Prophet's tomb is in Medina.

¹³ An Arabic title meaning "exalted one."

¹⁴ A weight of precious metal that varied by region.

¹⁵ The tribe of the Prophet.

¹⁶ Freed former slaves, therefore Qurayshis by adoption, not birth.

¹⁷ He gave each of four men 1,000 mithqals of gold.

1 his country, for the riding animals were too exhausted to use. When the ships, carrying the
2 *sharifs* from Mecca, reached the town of Kami, the Dienne-koy¹⁸...attacked the ships and
3 plundered all that they contained. They took the *sharifs* ashore and revolted against the Mali-koy.
4 But when the people of the ships told them about the *sharifs* and informed them of their high
5 station, they attended them, and installed them in a nearby place called Shinshin. It is said that
6 the *sharifs* of the town of Kay are descended from them.

7
8 This is the end of the story of the pilgrimage of the Mali-koy Kankan Musa....
9

10 As for Mali, it is a vast region and an immense country, containing many towns and
11 villages. The authority of the Sultan of Mali extends over all with force and might. We have
12 heard the common people of our time say that there are four sultans in the world, not counting
13 the supreme sultan,¹⁹ and they are the Sultan of Baghdad,²⁰ the Sultan of Egypt, the Sultan of
14 Bornu,²¹ and the Sultan of Mali.

¹⁸ The lord of Dienne, technically one of Mansa Musa's vassals.

¹⁹ The Ottoman sultan of Constantinople.

²⁰ The last Abbasid caliph of Baghdad died in 1258.

²¹ A West African trading rival of Songhay located in the region of Lake Chad, along the border of modern Chad and Nigeria.